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## THE OLD CHICAGO TRAIL.

A. VAN DYKE PIERSON.\*

Some one has said the study of any highway, for itself alone, might be of little value. But the story of a road which shows clearly the rise, nature and passing of a nation's need for it is of great importance. It is not of national import that there was a wilderness road to Kentucky. But it is of the utmost importance that a road through Cumberland Gap made possible the settlement of Kentucky, in that Kentucky held the Mississippi River for the feeble colonies, through days when everything in the West and the whole future of the American Republic lay in a trembling balance.

It is not of great importance that there was a trail known as Memacolins path across the Alleghanies. But when we read of that terrible night's march Washington made from Fort Necessity, which could not have been made except for this path; when the French scouting party was at last run to cover by Half Kings Indians, we shall know far better than ever the true story of the first campaign of the war, which won America for England. These are historical facts and should be of interest to every patriotic American, proving as they do, how apparently trivial things may affect the destiny of a great nation.

This article is not to be a treatise on historic highways, but rather to rescue from oblivion the old wagon road leading from Bloomington to Chicago, or, as it was frequently referred to by those who helped make it, as the old Chicago trail. Of the men who established and traveled this road, but few remain, and of the old trail, but very little of it is in use as a public highway at the present time. This road was a necessity to the pioneers of our county; and when it had served its day and generation, they thought no more about

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\* The manuscript of this sketch of the Old Chicago Trail was found among Mr. Pierson's papers after his death and his family felt that he would have been glad to have it printed in the Journal.

it, never dreaming that their efforts in road making would be of any interest to their descendants. Neither did it enter their thought that there would be societies formed for the express purpose of preserving, not only their words and deeds, but also their utensils and implements of toil, as well as their weapons of defense, for future generations. This is as it should be, not only concerning the pioneers of our county, but also the trails and the towns of that vanished race that once inhabited our groves and roamed our prairies. When I was a boy these trails were quite plain.

There was one leaving Mackinaw timber near Fort Henline, leading northeast to Indian Grove, twelve miles distant and almost on a bee line. There was another leading from the Kickapoo town, on my father's farm, to the Delaware town on the Mackinaw, three miles to the southeast, and from there to the Indian town at the head of Old Town Timber, about fifteen miles as the crow flies. There was also a trail from the Kickapoo town southwest to Smith's Grove, about ten miles as the trail ran; and then another was the Fort Clark trail, leading from the Kickapoo town a little northwest until it reached the fort, some fifty miles away.

The story of this old highway would not be of much interest if we were to consider it as a mere convenience, just to connect one settlement with another. But when we realize that this road made possible the development of our own county, besides being a most potent factor in the development of Chicago, then it becomes of great importance and should have its proper place in the history of our county.

The first movement towards establishing this road was in 1831. On the 21st of July of that year Jacob Spawr of Money Creek presented a petition to the county court, praying for a road from Frederick Rooks, on the Vermilion River, to William Evans, on the Mackinaw, thence to Jacob Spawr's, on the Money Creek, crossing Sugar Creek at a point north of Bloomington and below the forks of that stream; then south through Main Street, Bloomington; south through Randolph's Grove, Long Point to the south line of the county. This petition was granted. There was nothing more done in the matter until the spring of 1833, when Mr. James Dawson and his son, John, plowed a furrow with an ox team from the

point of the timber where Towanda now stands to the north edge of Blooming Grove. This furrow was parallel with and west of the Chicago and Alton tracks, passing through the present site of Normal, near where the street car tracks are now.

In 1834 there was another petition for a road over practically the same ground. This road was to pass Frank Trimmer's in Money Creek, Coonrod Flesher's, Lexington, Epperd's Point, and north to the Vermilion River. This road ran to the northeast the entire distance from Bloomington to the Vermilion and crossed the Mackinaw north of the wagon bridge near W. G. Long's farm, one mile west of Lexington. This was one of the worst fords on the Mackinaw. It was here that Mr. Albert Dodds, a gifted young lawyer of Bloomington, met his death by drowning during the great floods of June, 1844. After leaving the Mackinaw the road continued to the northeast, leaving Coonrod Flesher's, where the post office was kept for many years, to the south, then northeast through the present site of Lexington, passing Jacob Spawr's tavern, which was built after the road was located. It continued to the east, leaving the cattle corrals, built by the Dawson brothers for the accommodation of the cattle drovers, and were located about one mile northeast of Lexington, on the land now owned by the Kemp brothers. From here the road continued on the same northeast course to the crossing of the Vermilion River at Pontiac and was east of and ran parallel with the Chicago & Alton Railroad. The road crossed the Vermilion at Pontiac, just west of the old mill dam and near where the wagon bridge spans that stream. Here the road turned more to the north, passing to the west of where the C. & A. tracks are now located, and continued west of the railroad until Chicago was reached.

After leaving the Vermilion the road passed through Wolf's Grove, after which the road resumed a northwestern course, crossing the Mazon at Sulphur Springs, continuing in the same general direction until the Kankakee was reached and crossed at Beard's Crossing, five or six miles west of the city of Wilmington. The Desplaines was crossed at Van Austen's. The road ran along on the west side of the Desplaines River forty or fifty miles, crossing over to the east

side at Summit, continuing on the east side, passing through Brighton, and entered Chicago at Archers Avenue, then known as Archers Road.

The business center of Chicago was at that time south of the Chicago River. Among the first to visit Chicago from Lexington was Mr. John Dawson, who accompanied his father there shortly after it was incorporated as a town, which was August 12, 1833. Chicago at that time had a population of about 150. There was no road, nothing but prairie, with an occasional Indian trail, until they came to Joliet. Here the trail became more marked and the indications of the white man's presence became more evident.

While Peoria and Pekin were the nearest seaports, the early settlers of our county, and it would seem because of their location they should have been the trade centers of this part of central Illinois, before the advent of the railroad, but such was not the case. There was a little trading station on Lake Michigan, and although it was more than 120 miles away, it soon began to attract the attention and drew trade as early as 1835. The farmers of McLean County began to send, not only their cattle and hogs, but also their corn, wheat, oats and produce of all kinds to Chicago. This was the beginning of Chicago's greatness, and she has kept at it until her fame fills all the earth. The first shipments of grain from Chicago were in 1838 and consisted of a cargo of 100 bushels of wheat; and today she stands without a rival, being the greatest grain market in the world.

Along the old highway were numerous taverns for the accommodation of the traveler, most of these having passed from memory. Among the most noted were the Van Austen's, at the crossing of the Desplaines River; Judge Reynolds, near Joliet; the widow Jackson's, near Beard Crossing, and Jacob Spawr's of Lexington. These hostelries were patronized by the travelers and drovers, those engaged in hauling grain and produce. Because of their numbers, there being sometimes forty and fifty teams in a gang generally camped on the trail, in the pleasant weather. It was the custom in those early days for the feeder to penetrate to all parts of the country in search of cattle and hogs, which were collected and fed upon the farms, and when fattened were driven to

Chicago and sold. Now the feeder buys his cattle in Chicago, ships them back. This is supposed to be an improvement on the old way, and I think that it has the best hand of the argument.

It may be of interest to some to know that the first bunch of cattle bought in Chicago to be fed on the farms of our county was in 1847. In that year Mr. Isaac Funk and Jonathan Cheney bought a drove of 200 head and drove them down to the residence of Milton Smith at Pleasant Hill, where the cattle were divided equally, Mr. Cheney driving his to his home in Cheney's Grove and Mr. Funk taking his to Funk's Grove.

There is one item of interest connected with this old highway; that is the Barnard elm. This tree stood some little distance from the road and received its name as it was on Mr. Barnard's land. This tree could be seen for miles and was a landmark in the olden times. It was one of the largest trees in the county, being twenty-one feet in circumference, which would indicate a diameter of seven feet. This tree was a favorite resort for bees ever since the white man has known it. It has been regretted that there had not been some public spirited artist who would have presented the Historical Society with a photograph of it before its death.

With the coming of the railroads, this old wagon road, like Othello, found its occupation gone. Although cattle continued to be driven on it from Lexington to Chicago until along in the sixties, yet owing to the settlement of the country, the road of that time was not the road of 1835. This old road grew out of the country's need and was a mighty factor in developing our county as well as the great city by the lake.